

**Rosh HaShanah 1 5785: Expanding Compassion**  
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A few months ago, I attended a meeting of interfaith clergy. We met at a restaurant overlooking the water, and we did the standard go-around to introduce ourselves. We ordered, and then the smaller conversations began. How long have you been at your church? Where did you work before coming to this area? How are things at the synagogue? And then came THE question, and I wasn't prepared: Rabbi, how do you feel about the war?

This is a question so many of us have received during this last year. It may have been phrased slightly differently; it may not have been articulated at all! But the world seems to have lined up along the fault lines of this question, and everywhere we look, we are presented with it.

How *do* I feel about the war?

This question goes to the heart of the Jewish experience of the last year, and really to the core of what it means to be a Jew. Because the question beneath the question is this: Do you care only about your fellow Jews in this war, or does your compassion extend to the suffering of others, to Palestinian civilians, and in the last week, to Lebanese civilians? And if we push the question further, it could be getting at: Can you separate your loyalty and connection to the Israeli people from the decisions the Israeli government and military are making?

Friends, I don't know exactly how the last year has gone for you, but I have a feeling we've all been struggling with a version of this question, whether asked directly to us or not.

Somewhere along the way, our 76-year loyalty to the modern State of Israel has become something of a liability, a political litmus test where there used to be none. Somewhere in there, the narrative of Israel-as-modern-miracle, Israel-as-the-internationally-granted-home-of-the-Jewish-people has been supplanted by that of Israel-as-colonizer, Israel-as-occupier, Israel-as-oppressor. And while these ideas are not new in the last 12 months, they certainly have come to the fore, including throughout our country, especially on college campuses. There's no way to sugar-coat the dynamics in our country and throughout the world: as with so many aspects of our lives and societies, this is a polarizing issue, and frankly it is scary to see passions inflamed, anger burning, and words of protest threatening.

You see, even as I try to describe the socio-political dynamics, I see myself falling to one side of the line. My lifelong orientation has been to support Israel, and what I'm really doing is picturing the pro-Palestinian protesters, the anti-Israel demonstrations. I can barely manage to step outside of my corner of this conflict. But in order to make room for a vision of a more peaceful future, that's precisely what we must begin to do.

And so, on this first day of our new year, 5785, I ask a different question for us to ponder: How *do we want* to relate to the current situation in the Middle East? How much room is there for expanded compassion, and what does that look like? And what wisdom does our tradition offer us at such a trying and unprecedented time?

I want to offer 2 notes here. The first is obvious, but it must be said: This topic is really, really, really difficult. We will all have emotional responses to this conversation, and I want to make sure we all know that there is room for your experience *and* the experience of your fellow congregant. There must be. We are all in this together.

And the second: I'm not focusing in this moment on Hamas or on Iran, but of course the reason we're in this situation is because of their funding, planning, and carrying out of the attacks on October 7; their placement of fighters and weapons among the civilian population in Gaza; and their core belief that Israel and the Jewish people should not exist. I *am* working on the assumption that the civilian population in Gaza, although they elected Hamas, do not all share the same core beliefs about Israel and about Jews. Some may see this stance as naive; I'm choosing to focus on *tikvah*, hope.

So, how *do* we want to relate to this awful and painful conflict?

I'll start where I think most American Jews, although by no means all, are: when we think about the war, when we talk about the war, we're speaking about the suffering of Israelis and the world's Jews on and since October 7. We're reflecting on the trauma of the unprecedented and unprovoked attack, the murder of over 1200 Israelis and foreign nationals, including Americans, and the abduction of 251 souls into Hamas' terror tunnels. We're still trying—and failing—to process the gruesome systematic sexual violence they perpetrated against women and men. We're stuck in the seemingly endless desperate journey of trying to get these hostages home, of learning about them and praying for them and connecting to them and their families...and the tremendous sadness as we've learned of the terrible fate of so many. This war means supporting our Israeli friends and family who are living with sirens and rockets, and an intensified northern front against Hezbollah, and now Iran itself, and evacuations and fear for their lives; who are fighting in active duty and reserve duty for months and months on end; and the traumatic toll that is taking on them and on us. We're experiencing ourselves, closer to home and sometimes even in our own yards, the surge in anti-semitic acts and slurs. And we're struggling with the

anti-Israel encampments on many college campuses as we put our college students on the front lines of a battle they're ill-prepared for. This experience is real. We don't need the umpteen prooftexts<sup>1</sup> from the Torah and the Talmud to tell us that when our family is under fire, we pull together.

I know *I* walk around daily with this entire worldview—I deepen it with my news feeds, my social media, the prayers I myself have selected for our community. And I also know it's not enough.

Let me share some Torah to shift the perspective—2 teachings from Rabbi Shai Held, author of a new book *Judaism Is About Love*.

1. There's a well-known feature of the Torah—that it commands us no less than 36 times to “love the stranger”, *v'ahavtem et-ha'ger*.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Held points out that the Torah looking out for the *ger*, the stranger, is an innovation compared to other texts from the same time period. Everyone looked out for widows and orphans—the most vulnerable people in any ancient society—but the Torah chose to include the stranger. As Jews, we are obligated to protect and care for the *ger* just as much as we would our own family in need. Rabbi Held articulates the underlying value in the Torah: by including the *ger* in this group, **the Torah expands the categories of people we must care about and care for to include anyone in any vulnerable situation.**
2. And one other: We are familiar with Judaism's Golden Rule: *v'ahavta l're'acha kamocha*, usually translated as “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Held teaches a radically different understanding of this verse, first articulated by Nahmanides, the 12th-century Spanish commentator. Based on the grammar *l're'acha*—and not *et re'acha*—he asserts that **the focus is on what we want for our neighbors: “you shall love for your neighbor as you love for yourself.”** Wealth, good food, a great education, a lovely home, safety and security, and good health, to name a few—**none of these is a zero-sum game.**

*Care about* and *care for* anyone in any vulnerable situation.  
“You shall love *for your neighbor* as you love for yourself.”

*This* is how I want to relate to the conflict in Israel and the region of the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Metzia 71a

<sup>2</sup> For example, Deuteronomy 10:19

<sup>3</sup> Lev. 19:18

When I received that question at the clergy meeting, I found myself stumbling through my personal experience of the last year, while realizing that my conversation partners were looking for a signal that I cared about the suffering of Palestinian civilians, about their desperate longing for a sovereign state. Of course I do. I've just been stuck in my corner of this conflict. And my conversation partners were stuck in theirs, as, dare I say, most of us are.

So, even though the conflict has escalated and changed in recent days, I want to share with you 3 powerful glimpses into a different perspective, into arenas of expanded compassion, where individuals and groups are striving to love their neighbor—and *for* their neighbor—as for themselves.

1. Back in July, a group of Israeli and Palestinian teens performed on the stage of America's Got Talent. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus<sup>4</sup>, which was founded over a decade ago and which also performed at last year's Conservative Movement Convening in Baltimore, blew the audience away with their rendition of the song "Home" by Philip Philips. And when asked what they'd do if they won \$1 million, the answer was simple: they would create more spaces for Israelis and Palestinians to come together in dialogue and friendship, to create something beautiful and to dream together of a shared and just future. YES.
2. Also over the summer, a TED Talk was recorded at an historic "Event For Peace" in Tel Aviv. The conversation partners were 2 men, Maoz Inon, an Israeli entrepreneur, and Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian-American expert in conflict resolution. The 2 lead the InterAct Education Center<sup>5</sup>, which educates participants in the core value of dual narratives. During this conversation, Maoz, the Israeli, shared this: "I learned from my dialogue with Palestinians that we must forgive for the past, we must forgive for the present, but we must NOT forgive for the future... Our stories meet—they meet in the future." And Aziz, whose older brother was killed by Israeli soldiers when Aziz was just 10, shared this: "If we must divide us, then divide us between those who believe in peace and resolution, and those who don't—yet." I watch them talk together, with everything they and their families have lived through, and I am awed at their ability to look to the future and to envision it together.
3. Earlier this year, and much closer to home, I had the privilege of participating in a dialogue between Jewish and Muslim leaders through CONECT, Congregations Organized For a New Connecticut, of which Beth El has been a member congregation for the last 6 years. Now, I'll be honest. We were not nearly as integrated or polished in our conversation as the Jerusalem Youth Chorus or Maoz and Aziz. We relied on an expert facilitator, did a lot of prep work, and all agreed to the dialogue guidelines. I tried to share my experience and to receive everyone else's. I offered

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<sup>4</sup> <https://jerusalemyouthchorus.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iinteract.org/about-us>

support and empathy for the suffering expressed by my Muslim counterparts and felt heartened to hear them condemn the October 7 attack and the ongoing hostage nightmare. We spent our time together listening to the experiences of other human beings—what we’ve felt over the last year and what we’ve taken in from friends and family living through it. And I’ll tell you, it was really challenging to uncover differences of opinion and different tellings of historical events, to be aware of potentially triggering words. But we really tried to put first the relationships we were forging, and I think that’s the key. It was so important to have a space to speak together with Jews and Muslims who dream about and pray for *Salaam, Shalom, Peace*. Their narratives are just as important as my own experiences. And listening to them, being in relationship with them, expanding our compassion to include them—that’s the way forward. I want you to know about this dialogue, and if and when the opportunity comes for community members to participate, I hope you’ll consider it for yourself.

Sometime over the last year—maybe in November or December—I tested out adding in a few new words to my *Mi Sheberach* prayer, when we pronounce the names of those in need of healing. At first I added in the words *Kol Am Yisrael*—the entire nation of Israel—obviously so desperately in need of healing; and soon realized I needed to add the civilian population in Gaza, *Anshei Aza*, whose lives are literally in danger each day of this war. Our *machzor* contains similar, but more universal, language in each instance of *Oseh Shalom Bimromav*—it asks for peace *al-kol Yisrael v’al kol yoshvei tevel*, “for all Israel and for all who dwell on earth.” At times, I’ve felt self-conscious to pray publicly for Palestinians, for fear of backlash. But uttering these words is an act of expanding compassion, and it helps me to keep a wider perspective on human experience and human suffering. I add these words each Shabbat morning, each holiday, and every time I attend morning minyan, and I hope you will consider including them in your prayers as well.

The world, the conflict, the war—it’s all so heavy right now. AND today is a new year. I urge each of us: try on a wider perspective this year. Expand your compassion even a little bit. And don’t give up on the future—our stories will meet in the future, and we must begin to write them today.  
Shanah Tovah.